

"The Valley of Democracy"

Meredith Nicholson's Noteworthy Contribution to the
Business of Making America Understand the Americans

IN one respect Meredith Nicholson's book, *The Valley of Democracy*, is the most important book of the year, or of a number of years. The one respect is its purpose and its effect. A writer's purpose does not invariably, needless to say, coincide with the effect of his work; here purpose and effect overlap; the two are identical, and so we say "one" respect. The purpose is to help America to understand the Americans, and the book does just that. It does it by dint of the author's deep earnestness and manifest conscience in writing. It does it by virtue of timeliness; repeatedly Mr. Nicholson brings his notes down to this very hour, and events of last April, May and June are well assimilated in what he writes. And the effective purpose of the book is really successful because Mr. Nicholson has certain personal qualities and brings them to a difficult task. These qualities are the capacity to observe people closely and sympathetically and understand their motives, an equal capacity to weigh motives, and an extraordinary instinct for what is fair in those motives and for what is just as between any two of them.

The book consists of six papers on the region west of Pittsburg and east of Denver and stretching from the great lakes to—what is the Mason and Dixon line cutting the Mississippi? The middle West—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska and Colorado—is the region with which *The Valley of Democracy* deals. The title was suggested by a passage in John H. Finley's *The French in the Heart of America*; the region is not so much the upper Mississippi Valley as the whole stretch referred to by Lincoln in his annual message to Congress in December, 1862: "The great interior region bounded east by the Alleghanies, north by the British dominions, west by the Rocky Mountains and south of the line along which the culture of corn and cotton meets." This region is, as Lincoln called it, "the great body of the republic," and the rest of the United States is physically "but marginal borders to it."

The Home of "The Folks."

In the first division of his book, *The Folks and Their Folksiness*, Mr. Nicholson celebrates the middle West as the home of "the Folks." So it is, and precisely in the sense he describes and illustrates. The Westerner is more individualistic, more garrulous, more democratic than the Easterner; he is as hospitable as the Southerner, as prideful as the Californian. He has a passion for politics and "a proneness to social and political experiment"; he is distrustful of the East and hates capitalism; he is variously unconventional and extremely sensitive to criticism, but while condemnation only arouses him, ridicule undermines him. A little he does believe in his possession of "a breadth of vision and a devotion

to the common good at once beneficent and unique in the annals of mankind." Who is he, after all, that he should escape the defects of his virtues? There is truth as well as humor in the anecdote with which Mr. Nicholson opens his book:

"The great trouble with these fellows down here," remarked my friend as we left the office of

a New York banker, "the trouble with all of 'em is that they forget about the Folks. You noticed that when he asked in his large, patronizing way how things are going out West he didn't wait for us to answer; he pressed a button and told his secretary to bring in those tables of railroad earnings and to-day's crop bulletins and that sort of rubbish so he could tell us. It never occurs to 'em that the Folks are human beings and not just a column of statistics. Why the Folks—"

"My friend, an orator of distinction, formerly represented a tall corn district in Congress. He drew me into Trinity churchyard and discoursed in a vein with which I had long been familiar upon a certain condescension in Easterners. . . ."

The Winner of the West.

Mr. Nicholson is an—if we may dare—Indianapolis. He shows himself able to appreciate why Easterners, or many Easterners, disapprove of the West without, perhaps, distrusting the West as so many Westerners distrust the East. The West has faults which our middle West author does not conceal. An unquenchable faith in political panaceas has been one of them, but Mr. Nicholson thinks it is dying. A sort of tacit assumption that passing a law can right anything is less frequent nowadays in Western States. The East's disapproval of the West is certainly founded on insufficient knowledge, a condition which *The Valley of Democracy* will do something to remedy; the Western distrust of the East is often founded on no real knowledge at all. There is only one man who could do a vast deal to inform the West about the East; as Mr. Nicholson, who is a Democrat, we believe, makes exceedingly clear, this man is the only Easterner who absolutely commands the ear of the West. Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote *The Winning of the West*, can tell the West about the East and the West will believe him.

The second paper of the book, *Types and Diversions*, suffers in places from a little heaviness of touch in handling the flimsiest material. But of the material there is a great wealth here and in every page of the book, and the range is all the way from a youth at the pie counter on an excursion boat to fateful aspects of the Presidential campaign of 1916. The third paper, on *The Farmer of the Middle West*, is a tremendously fine study.

The Remaining Papers.

Chicago has a chapter to itself in Mr. Nicholson's book, and the paper on it is taken up mainly with a sketch of the efforts to make a better city and a better governed city. The paper on *The Middle West in Politics* deserves to be put alongside the article on *The Farmer of the Middle West*.

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VALLEY
OF
DEMOCRACY"



"Ten days of New York, and it's me for my home town."